

Capsule History of Ashley County

The southeast section of the Territory of Arkansas was originally called the great wilderness - so dense with trees and lush undergrowth that wild animals were its only inhabitants. Some-time in the annals of history the people came - first the Indians and later the pioneers who recognized the potentials for settlement. They came, they saw and they started conquering with hand-felled timber, hand hewn logs to build homes, churches (in which the first schools were held), and later...

It was in this area that Drew County was formed from Bradley County November 26, 1846; then on November 30, 1848 Ashley County was formed from Drew and organized by legislative action to become the fifty-third county of the state of Arkansas. A part of Ashley was restored to Bradley January 1, 1859, and the line between Ashley and Chicot Counties was changed January 19, 1861. Thus its official boundaries remain today. Hamburg was selected as the "seat of justice" and the total population of the county in 1850 was 2,080 people.

The first county court determined the boundary lines of the five original townships - White, Egypt, Carter, DeBastrop and Union, and ten road districts were defined. During the same court on April 30, 1849, the order was made that "one-sixth of one percent be levied as ad valorum tax on all taxable property in the county, as well as seventy five cents for each white free 'mail' inhabitant over the age of twenty-one and under the age of sixty years." The county was in the third congressional district, and the tenth judicial circuit. The first chancery court was held at the house of Isaac Denson in Fountain Hill (for the use of his house he was allowed \$5), and Mr. Denson's house was used for both county and circuit court for the first several sessions.

At the April term of the county court in 1850, arrangements were made for the building of a county jail "to cost \$1,200" and with explicit instructions as to its construction. (What a sad commentary on mankind that throughout the pages of history the housing for criminals and lawbreakers has taken first precedent in government in all nations.) In the October term of court during that year commissioners were appointed to let the building of a clerk's and sheriff's offices at a cost of \$200.00; in the April term of court, 1853, commissioners were appointed for the construction of a courthouse with "said building not to exceed the cost of \$5,000." In January, 1854, the first payment is recorded as having been made to the contractors, and the last payment is recorded in September of the same year.

Since 1854 four courthouses have been constructed in the county - the last one, a modern complex which houses all officials and offices connected with county government, in 1969 at a cost of \$675,000 under the leadership of the present county judge, W. T. Higginbotham.

Out of the great wilderness of timber, rich farmland, plentiful water supply, abundance of game, and the natural beauty of rolling hills, grassy plains, and profusions of wild flowers then, Ashley County's evolution has included the development of her natural resources and technology to become fourteenth in per capita income in the seventy-five counties of Arkansas. This evolution has included diversified farming and other agricultural pursuits; growth of a sawmill operation into one of the largest timber and timber by-products industries in the state on into the Crossett Division of Georgia-Pacific - one of the largest corporations of its kind in the nation; private businesses that have flourished from one-man operatorship into pay-rolls; a county-wide system of roads that lends easy and quick access to all parts of the area; and her people have remained steadfast during this process of evolution from the past.

Ashley County has few of the original churches established during her pioneer days, but she boasts several churches in each town and many in the more sparsely populated areas; schools have evolved from the one-room red schoolhouse to school systems through consolidation and continual improvement in the educational area of life. Cultural interests have not been neglected - from the "olden" days of handwork at home, arts and crafts have been polished to include painting - professional and amateur -, ceramics, creative woodwork and many others; two public libraries have been established; and ~~numerous~~ innumerable civic and cultural organizations flourish to promote culture in the county.

Though she is no longer the great wilderness, Ashley County is not completely tamed. Wild life abounds along with untouched natural surroundings, and though her natural streams are not what they once were, the water supply is still abundant and there are many man-made lakes in varied locations. In this, the bicentennial year of our country, Ashley County has much for which to be grateful: Her local heritage, her national heritage, her prosperity, her posterity... Our forefathers came, yes they came, they saw, and through the years they have conquered... So, too, through the grace of God shall we!